

Chapter 8

Japanese Gender Norms and Their Impact on Male Attitudes Toward Women

Gavan Patrick Gray

Abstract

Japan is home to a relatively conservative and group-oriented culture in which social expectations can exert powerful pressure to conform to traditional patterns of behaviour. This includes gender norms, which have long been based around the common stereotypes of men as breadwinners and women as housewives. Social liberalisation and economic change in the late 20th century saw these patterns change as more women entered the workforce and, despite Japan's dismal standing in global equality rankings, began to make inroads into some positions of political and corporate leadership. Yet, the way in which women are treated by men is shaped not only by female gender norms but also by the social factors that determine male patterns of behaviour. This chapter considers how Japan's male gender norms, particularly the focus on man as economic labourers rather than active members of the family unit, have damaged many men's ability to connect, on an emotional level, with the women in their lives. It looks at the issue of misogyny; what is known as the Lolita Complex; the growing trend of herbivore men; and the concept of Ikumen, men who are active within the family. While some of these patterns of behaviour can be harmful – for women on the individual level, and for Japan as a whole, on the social level – there are some trends which suggest that gender norms in Japan can be directed in a manner which will allow for much healthier emotional relationships to develop between the genders in a manner that will help build a society that is more cognisant of and attentive to the needs of women.

Gender Violence, the Law, and Society, 143–159



Copyright © 2022 Gavan Patrick Gray

Published by Emerald Publishing Limited. This work is published under the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY 4.0) licence. Anyone may reproduce, distribute, translate and create derivative works of this work (for both commercial and non-commercial purposes), subject to full attribution to the original publication and authors. The full terms of this licence may be seen at <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/legalcode>.

doi:[10.1108/978-1-80117-127-420221012](https://doi.org/10.1108/978-1-80117-127-420221012)

Keywords: Gender norms; misogyny; lolita complex; ikumen; Grasseaters; Japan

In collective cultures, of which Japan is a good example, behavioural expectations are often seen more as unspoken rules than loose guidelines, and people frequently exhibit severe discomfort – to a far greater degree than in the West – when stepping outside of social norms.¹ It is no surprise to find that these patterns extend to gender roles and, despite having eased considerably in past decades, these forces still have a powerful influence upon the patterns of social behaviour that both women and men feel obligated to conform to.

Although Japan had originally been a matriarchal culture, the introduction of first Buddhism, and later Confucian ideals, brought about a shift to a strictly patriarchal social structure from roughly the 6th century A.D. (Joyce, Paulson, & Powers, 1976, p. 4, Silva-Grođin, 2010). Despite this, during the later Tokugawa era (17th to 19th century), women's roles were not purely servile and depending upon social class, there were expectations that women would be well educated (Tocco, 2003, p. 194). It was during the Meiji era (1868–1912) that perhaps the most impactful gender norm came into existence, the concept of *ryōsai kenbo*, or 'good wife, wise mother', which was an injunction to women to use their education for the development of their children in a socially productive manner (Koyama, 2013).

During the early 20th century, this was explicitly taught to young women as a staple of education, even to the extent that they should see childbirth as a patriotic duty. This paradigm met resistance, however, from Japanese feminists and liberals who, by the 1980s, were making public calls for it to be replaced by greater standards of equality and increased female access to political and economic systems (Uno, 1993). Nonetheless, the underlying belief in the wise mother raising socially productive children still has a powerful influence over deep-rooted gender norms that affect men just as deeply as they do women. In particular, the notion that the family is the woman's domain, and that child-rearing is her responsibility, continues to support the equally rigid and outdated norm that the man's role is as the breadwinner and that work takes precedence over involvement in family affairs, whether marital or child-related.

This male gender stereotype, the industrious and productive, yet distant, breadwinner, has been a staple since the 1950s and, though it is beginning to slowly change, has created an emotional crisis among many Japanese men that deeply affects the way they view and treat women. When considering Japanese social attitudes towards women, it is therefore vital to understand the normative forces that shape men's interactions with them. Rather than seeing Japanese society as a patriarchal structure that marginalises women, it is important to recognise that a great many men have serious emotional problems that manifest in a variety of ways. I should make it clear that this by no means describes the

¹This work was supported by a Kaken grant (18K13005) from the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science.

majority of Japanese men, very many of whom are emotionally well adjusted. However, the extreme cases are common enough to act as significant warning flags for underlying problems in the way many men relate to women. In some cases, this is inherently negative, where efforts to address emotional stress see men attempt to maintain a dominant role over subservient women (misogyny). In others it sees men fixate upon unthreatening juvenile women (*lolicon* or 'lolita complex'). In some cases, the stress of relationships sees men reject romantic entanglement of any kind (*sōshoku danshi*). Others choose a, seemingly, healthier path and attempt to reclaim a male role within the family dynamic by playing an active part in child-rearing (*ikumen*). Each of these is a direct response to emotional needs among Japanese men that are all too often neglected and each has a major impact upon how such men view and treat the women they know and encounter. Some are significant enough that they have a far-reaching effect on Japanese culture, including the way in which the 'ideal' woman is portrayed and how women, in general, are treated. Addressing gender equality in Japan, even if narrowly focused upon promoting the welfare of women, requires understanding the forces behind these differing patterns of male behaviour and the positive and negative impact they can have upon gender relations.

Current Gender Norms

The late 19th-century industrialisation of the country failed to bring about any significant alteration in women's economic or legal status. It was really only the drafting of the post-WWII constitution that introduced a fundamental reordering of gender structures (Ochiai, 1997). In the following decades, some claim that there had been a steady displacement of the samurai ideal of masculinity, replaced instead by a feminine elevation of soft, cute imagery and a greater leaning towards passivity (Yano, 2009, p. 684).

There is no question, however, that men are still firmly in the driver's seat in political and economic terms. Recent laws have introduced guidelines for establishing gender parity in political candidates but women still made up less than a quarter of those gaining seats in recent elections (Johnston, 2020), while in the corporate world less than 8% of top executives are female (Kinouchi, 2021). There is a wide variety of factors that perpetuate these imbalances but Japan's deeply entrenched gender norms are one of the strongest. From expectations over life paths to the pervasive endurance of outdated idioms, such as *Otoko wa dokyō*, *onna wa aikyō* (men should be daring, women should be charming), they have an especially strong power in collective cultures to reinforce conformity to established patterns.

Yet, in comparison to the West, there has been far less hostile resistance to these norms. In the 20th century, Japanese women did not typically view the role of housewives as oppressive but rather as a separate and distinct source of power over both the family and society (Schultz, Tufis, & Alwin, 2010, p. 188). Such views persist, and in many cases, it is women who have more traditional outlooks than men. A 2012 government survey found that 50% of men believed it is better

for their wives to do all the housework, while among women 60% held the same view. Similarly, while 75% of men said they expect husbands to be the main breadwinner, 80% of women held the same view. Asked whether women should continue to work after having children, 40% of men said they should not, compared to 55% of women. Of course, in some areas more patriarchal views were evident, such as 35% of men saying they feel housewives should follow their decisions, with only 20% of women agreeing (Cabinet Office, 2011, pp. 14–17).

Even these brief questions highlight some persistent trends in gender issues in Japan; women want more freedom from male decision-making but they do not feel this is necessarily connected to relinquishing established roles within the familial structure. What can we infer about men, though? The most dominant theme is that they are expected, by both sexes, to act as breadwinners and to have a focus on work. A separate and more recent survey highlighted the key factor even more clearly. When asked ‘What society expects from being a man?’, by far the most popular response (68%) was ‘success at work and financial support for their family’. The next two most popular responses were ‘not to cry or become emotional’ (36%) and ‘to show leadership’ (29%). Among the least popular responses were ‘to display empathy’ (5.5%) and ‘childcare’ (5.5%) (Asahi, 2020). There is no question that Japan has deep gender imbalances, but it is equally true that the country’s gender norms place severe restrictions on the manner in which men are expected to develop emotionally, and limitations on the role they are expected to play within the family structure.

Emotional Development

It is understandable that cultural factors produce distinct patterns of emotional development when comparing a more collective society, such as Japan, and a more individualistic one, such as the United States (Kitayama, Mesquito, & Karasawa, 2006). A common factor, though, is that girls are generally expected to be more expressive and empathetic, while boys are expected to externalise their emotions. In Japan, boys are specifically expected to either hide emotion completely or to express it through ‘displays of anger or disgust’ (Saeki, Watanabe, & Kido, 2015, p. 30).

Traditionally, it was expected that these pressures would begin with the onset of elementary school and it was only in the period before that when boys could be emotionally free. With the father’s role being highly career-focused, the child’s emotional development was primarily tied to, and strongly influenced by, interactions with their mother who became the source of familial discipline (Benedict, 1989, pp. 254, 263). Miyamoto (1994, p. 186) saw this as a source of emotional dependency and reticence as well as the development of a skewed view of spousal relationships that was typically devoid of displays of affection, romance or physical attraction. For many men, this created an expectation that romantic partners and marriage partners were distinct things and that the idealised form of the latter was a traditional, asexual, mother-figure.

The notion of emotional dependency has taken a specific form in Japan through the concept of *Amae*, which Doi (1973, p. 167) defined as, ‘the craving of

a newborn child for close contact with its mother and the desire to deny the act of separation that is an inevitable part of human existence'. The concept has since been further studied and refined into distinct aspects and qualities that go beyond the preceding simplification (Behrens & Kondo-Ikemure, 2011). One common factor, however, was that insecurely attached children are the most affected by it, i.e. that it can exacerbate patterns of emotional fragility (Komatsu, 2011, p. v). The problematic aspect of this occurs when men consider future partners through the sole lens of being a suitable mother, rather than the additional aspects of either a romantic lover or an emotional friend. Success in finding the former can often result in deficits in other areas of their life that leave men with serious unsatisfied needs that they will, due to their own normative expectations, be reluctant to express openly.

The education system has done little to ease such problems, and in fact, is far more likely to exacerbate them where they exist. The implicit message that sexual relations within the family are purely a matter of procreation has generally been reinforced by limited sexual education curricula that focus purely on biological matters and disregard matters of emotion, sexuality or relationships (Hashimoto et al., 2017, pp. 391–395). Only recently have advocates begun to have some success in introducing the importance of exploring the latter subjects (Kuwahara, 2019), but it has already had a deep impact on the very nature of relationships for an extended period. Salamon (1974, p. 131) wrote that in Japan, apart from the courting and honeymoon period, sex was separate from home life and that, as a result, working men were alienated from their families and ill-equipped to interact with the opposite sex. A large part of why the sex industry became so deeply entrenched was that it provided both a sexual and emotional outlet for men. In the words of Allison (2009, p. 175): it allowed men, regardless of their station in life, to have a sense of worth. There are significant questions, however, regarding whether the worth derived from such sources is truly healthy for those involved.

Jolivet (1997, pp. 66–69) considered this rigid demarcation of boundaries something that risked men enduring an identity crisis when asked to take on roles of 'good father' or 'good husband', roles regarding which they had not received any prior guidance. Both Doi (1973, p. 153) and Iwao (1993) commented on the absence of men from family life, with the idea that Japan had, towards the end of the 20th century, become a 'fatherless society'. There are strong signs, as we shall see later, that efforts are being made to change this and to make men more active within the family structure. However, almost always the driving force behind these changes, though done in the name of gender equity, is from the perspective of balancing the workload of the female partner, in other words, a strong focus on male participation in childcare as an instance of burden-sharing. While this is worthwhile in its own right, it overlooks the, arguably, more significant aspect of male participation in the family unit, which is the healthy emotional growth, support and outlet that it provides.

The Japanese government found that women are open to men being more emotionally expressive, with 46% of women disagreeing that 'men should not be weak', compared to just 18% of men. Women were also far more likely to want men to express their private feelings although only 17% of men said that, 'when I

have a problem, I feel I can talk to someone about it' (Cabinet Office, 2011, pp. 20–21). For all the restrictions that gender norms place upon Japanese women, these norms have also done considerable damage to men, particularly in terms of how they express themselves or fail to do so: patterns of behaviour that, in turn, can have a strong impact on the women they interact with.

Misogyny

There is no doubt that persistent strands of misogynistic behaviour are a problem within Japanese society. There are, however, significant differences of opinion as to both the extent and the root causes of the problem. One perspective, as put forth by Ueno (2019), is that men hold an imbalance of power in society because to become a man means 'being accepted by men' while becoming a woman also requires 'being accepted by men'. This completely overlooks the fundamental importance of the key roles men can play, first as lover, then husband and finally father, and how much the acceptance of women means to so many men. Ueno also highlights money and economic success as being the primary determinant of a man's self-image, and how men determine their 'pecking order'. Once again, this grossly oversimplifies men and overlooks how important emotional bonds are to their identity and sense of self.

When we refer to misogyny we can look beyond simple hatred of women, to the more narrowly defined desire to control the social roles that they play. Manne's (2019, p. 33) definition is suitable, classifying it as 'a system that operates within a patriarchal social order to police and enforce women's subordination and to uphold male dominance'. Examples of this within Japan are boundless, with a recent one being the statements of Yoshiro Mori, former Chairman for the 2020 Tokyo Olympics, berating women for being noisy and taking up too much time at meetings with unnecessary comments (Asahi, 2021). Such pressure for 'noisy women' to assume a docile and subservient position in society seeks conformity with the traditional view of the housewife who will not contradict her husband's opinions on matters outside of family affairs. If, as Allison stated, many Japanese men use the sex industry as a substitute source of self-worth that they cannot find in their homes, it is understandable, though certainly not forgivable, that such men will feel challenged by women who threaten to undermine the self-worth they derive from their traditional, career-focused roles.

There is a pattern of behaviour that can occur within Japanese marriages known as *katenai rikon* (divorce within the household), wherein couples maintain the marriage purely as a matter of social convenience despite having no meaningful interpersonal communication or relationship. In some cases, this will persist until retirement, after which a real divorce can occur when the wife realises she no longer gains any financial benefit from the arrangement, something referred to as *teinen rikon* (retirement divorce) (Cherry, 2016, p. 19). Even during the marriage, the husband can lose control of his own finances with the term *sen-en teishu* (1,000 yen husband) referring to men who sacrifice their paychecks to their wives'

control, receiving only a minuscule, and emasculating, stipend as pocket-money for the month (Cherry, 2016, p. 96).

It might be expected that these marital pressures would reveal themselves most in misogynistic behaviour among the older generation, in other words, men who have experienced many decades of gender-related, marital stress. However, surveys conducted on the question of ‘Does Japan need to take gender equality more seriously?’ found that support among men generally increased with age (Dentsu, 2021), with the lowest results being among those aged 30–39, typically the prime years of establishing a family. Divorce rates in Japan have been steadily increasing over the past four decades and more than 30% of marriages are estimated to end in divorce (Alexy, 2010, p. 238). Given this, it is perhaps understandable that those who are recently married are more concerned with traditional norms regarding family structure and career roles that might seem to offer a sense of greater stability.

The contradictory outcome of this mindset, however, is that women are relegated to one of two broad stereotypes, either the pure ‘good girl’ who adheres to the established rules, or the impure woman of ‘loose moral character’. While the former is often envisioned as loving mother, dutiful housewife or pure daughter, the latter is often sexualised, though the division is far more about submission than it is about sex. For example, a subservient and docile junior employee, or a quietly attentive hostess might be seen in the former light due to behaving according to the rules of a ‘pure’, i.e. submissive, woman. Even if the interaction involves sex, it can be deemed traditionally acceptable if the woman accepts her allotted hierarchical status in the interaction. Meanwhile, an outspoken female co-worker or a sexually demanding woman might be seen as ‘impure’ or, as with the aforementioned Mr Mori, ‘noisy’ due to their failure to acquiesce to male dominance or established, patriarchal norms.

Though this mindset is far from all-pervasive, its influence can be seen in many areas of Japanese society, especially where sex might be seen as falling out of male control. One example would be the arrest, under obscenity laws, of artist Megumi Igarashi for producing artwork based on her genitalia (Abe, 2020). Meanwhile, sex toys based upon the genitalia of famous pornographic actresses are openly sold on major sites such as Amazon Japan.² In a similar vein, a 2003 book saw a collaboration between Tsunku, the producer of several wildly popular girl’s idol groups, and Ganari Takahashi, the founder of one of Japan’s major pornography labels (Takahashi & Tsunku, 2003). The book focused on something the two entrepreneurs had in common, namely the methods used to market and sell young girls, though one focused on images of purity and the other of impurity.

This dangerously unhealthy framework to try to confine women within is clear, and attempting to fit them into such limited moulds produces a warped and dehumanising view of women in general. This has frequently been highlighted using the way some of the afore-mentioned idol groups treat their young recruits,

²This can easily be verified by searching the site for the terms 女優 (actress) and 女ホー儿 (the type of sex toy).

with those failing to abide by their rigid facade of purity receiving treatment verging on the abusive. This was perhaps most clearly seen in the cases of Maho Yamaguchi, who was forced to apologise to fans after she had been attacked by two of them (Tanaka, 2019), and Minami Minegishi, who shaved her own head as an act of contrition after daring to spend time with a boyfriend (St. Michel, 2013). Yet, this treatment of young women as marketable objects is just one negative element of an industry that feeds off a separate male emotional problem: a fixation upon non-threatening and submissive, juvenile females, something commonly known as ‘Lolita Complex’.

Lolita Complex

Japan has long had a cultural attraction to things that are delicate and ephemeral. The concept of *mono no aware* refers to the sadness of passing things, idealised in the annual cherry blossom viewings. From this came a fondness for things that are *kawaii*. Though translated to cute, it more broadly refers to things that are weak and in need of protection and can be applied to both inanimate and living things (Sato, 2009). The most notable element of this culture is perhaps the cartoon mascots that Japan embraces, cute characters like Rira Kuma, Hello Kitty and the various Sumiko Gurashi. The most notorious, though, is the fixation on young girls, whether of the animated or real kind.

According to Professor Kimio Ito, of Kyoto University, men’s culture in Japan had lost its focus in the 1970s. For them, life was the simple commitment to work. In contrast, women were embracing new freedoms and being catered to by a wide variety of media in which their lives were represented with bright vivid colours and boundless opportunity. Young men began to fixate upon female characters as an alternative to relationships they were unable to develop in their own lives (Galbraith, 2017, p. 29). By the 1980s, this had developed into a wave of *seishun* or ‘youth’ entertainment; television shows and manga which focused on high school life as an idealised time of emotional growth and meaningful relationships. The first idol group, precursors to the wildly popular AKB-48 and similar groups, took form in O-Nyanko Kurabu (Kitten Club), 11 teenage girls who dressed in school uniforms and sang overly sexualised songs.³

At the same time, fictional female characters, ‘magical girls’ such as Sailor Moon, were becoming increasingly popular with male audiences. Both of these trends, the idols and the fictional characters were marketed on characteristics (purity, freedom, respect and a lack of threat) that would form the key appeal for men who embraced what came to be called *Lolicon* or Lolita Complex (Saito, 2013, p. 158). Mari Kotani, a Japanese pop culture critic, suggests that there is no difference between the idols and the cartoon characters as in either case the men are committing themselves to an idealised, utterly fictional creation (Galbraith, 2017, p. 35). The important factor in both cases, according to Yoshiko (1997, p. 183), is

³With titles like: *Don’t make me take off my sailor uniform, Better be good, teacher and Uh-oh, a pervert!*

that inexperienced men's virginal fear of more mature women is alleviated by the imagery of undeveloped, unmotherly, innocent girls who represent no threat. Masahiro Morioka, a professor of ethics at the prestigious Tokyo University, freely admits to suffering from a Lolita Complex and links it specifically to having an emotional dependency on his mother, coupled with an inability to adjust to the sexual awakenings of puberty (Otake, 2017). For Morioka, his fixation on young girls was very much a rejection of his own masculinity.

This is something echoed by Maruta (2001, pp. 150–154), who claims that these adolescent girls represent an idealised form of *kawaii* as beauty. However, Maruta touches on the dark side of this attraction when he claims that sexual transactions between young girls and older men, what is known as *Enjo Kōsai* (literally 'social support' but more accurately 'compensated dating'), are not prostitution as it represents female equality with, or even dominance over, weaker men. This is certainly a problematic and superficial assessment, yet, it is not wrong in identifying the customers as men with serious emotional issues. In an analysis of compensated dating in Hong Kong, Chu (2018, p. 77) found that similar views were common among those who engaged in the activity. These were men between 18 and 44 years, whom the girls referred to as 'big brother', and who considered their activities as a form of relationship rather than prostitution. It is true that such activities often include non-sexual services, such as having dinner, watching movies or visiting amusement parks – and sex, where it does occur, usually happens after other activities (Wakabayashi, 2003). It is the age of the girls involved, however, rather than the specific activities, that make it exploitative and dangerous, even where no sexual activity occurs. Teenagers who engage in these activities very often come from families with internal dysfunctions, whether emotional absence, a lack of parental care or excessive control (Lee, 2016). In other words, they are children with a degree of emotional damage that leaves them vulnerable to manipulation.

At its height, in the late 1990s, an estimated 4% of both junior and senior high school girls were involved in such activities (Kadokura, 2007). The numbers have since declined due to government crackdowns and social pushback but it remains an ongoing problem that stretches into other areas, whether pornography, animated sexual cartoons or what is known as *chaku ero* (erotic clothing): a form of sexually targeted film which involves young girls (some of kindergarten age) being recorded in non-sexual but provocative poses and skimpy clothing. The films of younger girls are especially lucrative, making tens of thousands of dollars, and are nominally legal (Varley, 2017).

This is just one of the loopholes that continue to exist following the nominal outlawing of the possession of materials related to child sexual abuse in 2014.⁴

⁴The author agrees with the view that the term 'child pornography' is unsuitable in that it conflates something that is of arguable harm and of complete legality, with something that is inarguably harmful and rightfully illegal. The question of whether Chaku Ero, as a grossly exploitative abuse of young children in a blatantly sexual manner, should also be made illegal is not a question that currently seems to have a high priority for the Japanese government.

The problem is that for many with a more innocent/naive view of the world, such imagery (when not grossly indecent) is purely a representation of *kawaii* and any sexual elements are largely unnoticed. Keiji Goto, a lawyer campaigning for child rights, believes that many in Japan think the objectification of young girls falls into a grey area and is not inherently problematic (AFP, 2018), once again a nod to the deep-rooted gender norms which portray women as being either icons of purity or impurity. Hiroki Fukui, a psychiatrist who has treated paedophiles, says that there is a very low level of awareness in Japan of the dangers posed by child sexual predators and too many are not even aware that there is a problem (AFP, 2018). Morioka adds that a similar lack of awareness exists among the men themselves and that they display a deep ‘lack of self-reflection on sexuality’, and that, ‘if more heterosexual men talk about their own sexuality, it could prevent or correct further “lolicon-ification” of Japanese society’ (Otake, 2017). If, as Morioka claims, the underlying issue for many of these men is their inability to understand and come to terms with their own male sexuality, efforts to address such issues will almost certainly apply just as much to the aforementioned misogynistic individuals as to a group who have chosen to respond to problems of complex gender dynamics by retreating entirely from the playing field.

Sōshoku Danshi

Birth rates in Japan have been declining for decades with each year bringing new record lows (Nikkei, 2020). At the same time, the average age of marriage, and the number of those who never marry, has been increasing. In 2019, the marriage rate was less than half of what it was in 1970, while the average age of marriage increased by 2.5 years and 2.8 years, for men and women respectively, over the past 20 years (SBJ, 2020).

Analysts have looked at a wide variety of factors that may have influenced these patterns and from 2009 a relatively new term suddenly became widely used in reference to the declining interest shown by young men in romantic relationships. *Sōshoku-kei danshi* (herbivore men or grass-eaters) was originally coined by the writer Maki Fukuzawa but took several years to gain widespread use. It referred to the unthreatening character of young men who are shy around girls, passive in their interactions and, importantly, happy to remain in the friend zone. Japan has a fondness for systems of classification and as the term grew in use similar expressions arose for other types of men: *nikushoku danshi* (meat eaters) for men who aggressively pursue women, *gyoshoku danshi* (fish eaters) for men who are attracted to women but more patient, *kurīmu danshi* (creamy) for men who are soft and gentle but still masculine (Nicolae, 2014, p. 71). Only the original, however, had a specific relation to changing patterns of masculinity that threatened to greatly exacerbate Japan’s long demographic decline.

Social withdrawal is a particular aspect of Japanese culture that is most pronounced in the behaviour of the *hikikomori* (literally, those who pull inward), people who cut off all direct contact with others. Some think this may represent a distinct psychological disorder bound by elements of Japanese culture (Teo &

Gaw, 2010), and it may be that *sōshoku danshi* are exhibiting a similar response to social anxiety, albeit limited to the one area that gives them the most stress: sexual intimacy.

Authors such as Kitamura (2011) posited a variety of potential influences on this trend: pressure and stress surrounding the act of sex itself, the disparity between ‘real women’ and the idealised fantasies many young men had developed, a decline in communication skills due to modern lifestyles, and the burden of work leaving young people with little time or energy for romantic activity. One important factor, however, was not that all young men were shying away from sex but, rather, that there was a growing polarisation between those who engaged in sexual activity from a relatively young age and those who had no sexual experience at all. Surveys carried out by the Japan Association for Sex Education found a strong trend among young people, from teens to university students, to increasingly regard sex as something that was not pleasurable. The pattern was more pronounced among high school students and female college-age students and the authors attributed it largely to a breakdown in sexual communication. In other words, they noted an increasing difficulty, in part attributable to technology, for young people to have meaningful interchanges of opinions on emotion and interpersonal relations (NSK, 2019).⁵

Japan’s Finance Minister, Taro Aso, rightly came under fire when he commented regarding Japan’s declining population, ‘The problem is those who don’t have children’ (Mainichi, 2019). There are many perfectly legitimate reasons why people might not have children. The problem is not that they do not have them, but rather that other factors may be preventing many people who might benefit greatly from romantic relationships – whether tied to childbirth or otherwise – from engaging in them.

A 2015 survey on Marriage and Family Formation by the Japanese Cabinet Office found that the most common reason for people not wanting a relationship was that, ‘love is troublesome’ (Sankei, 2015). Thousands of years of human experience would suggest otherwise – with love, and a desire to be accepted for who we are, whether by lovers, spouses or children – being one of the fundamental drivers of the human condition.

As Victor Hugo wrote in *Les Misérables*, ‘The supreme happiness of life is the conviction that we are loved; loved for ourselves – say rather, loved in spite of ourselves’. Tolstoy, who was profoundly influenced by the earlier work of Hugo, said much the same in his opus *War and Peace*, ‘Seize the moments of happiness, love and be loved! That is the only reality in the world, all else is folly. It is the one thing we are interested in here’.

In a similar vein, the Japanese author Arishima Takeo wrote, ‘Where there is love, let there be family. Where there is none, let no family exist. Only by allowing this can men and women be freed from horrible lies’. Another well-known Japanese writer, Uchimura Kanzō, wrote of how ‘Love is taken without reserve. It

⁵Kindle Edition, Chapter 1, Section 5.

has no fear, it is the highest morality. In love there is no doubt, for love is the greatest truth. Love has no bonds, it is true freedom’.

That so many people in Japan would now regard the pursuit of love as ‘troublesome’ suggests a growing divergence in understanding about what love and relationships mean to young people and the possibility that they are poorly educated about the benefits that such things can offer. Thankfully, there are aspects of Japanese male gender norms that have adopted a more healthy and engaged attitude towards the importance of relationships. One of these is the concept of *ikumen*.

Ikumen

Ikumen is a portmanteau of *ikuji* (child-rearing) and *ikemen* (handsome) and refers to a type of man who is particularly attractive to women because they take an active role in raising children. The word was first used in 2010 and became part of an ongoing project by the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare to promote gender equality by having men take on more responsibility for childcare.⁶ At the outset of the Ikumen project the idea of playing an active part in childcare was still rare with 26% of men agreeing with the statement that, ‘a father’s work-centred life is a key to family happiness’, and the majority among those who did not explicitly agree still adhering to social expectations in this regard (Cabinet Office, 2012, p. 16). In the intervening years, views have shifted only slightly with 30% of men still believing that work should be prioritised over family and that women should carry out housework and child-rearing. These views are, however, higher for men in their 50s and 60s and notably lower for those in their 20s and 30s (Cabinet Office, 2021, p. 16).

The project has continued and the government’s Gender Equality Bureau highlights the wide variety of programmes set up throughout the country to support men in becoming more involved in child-rearing, whether by learning to cut their children’s hair, taking cooking lessons or practising first aid.⁷ However, a 2019 survey by the Japanese Trade Union Confederation found that 45% of fathers said they spent only 5 hours or less with their children each week, with 13.5% saying they spent no time on child-rearing (Rengo, 2019, p. 6). When asked about which should be more important, childcare or work, 19.1% said work should come first, 14.1% said childcare should come first, while the majority (62.7%) said there should be a balance. Yet, when asked what came first in their actual lives, 56.5% said they prioritise work and only 6.8% said they prioritise childcare (Rengo, 2019, p. 9).

⁶Homepage of the Japanese Government’s ‘Ikumen’ project at the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, <https://ikumen-project.mhlw.go.jp/>.

⁷Examples of suggested measures to promote participation of men in housework, at the Japanese Government’s Gender Equality Bureau, https://www.gender.go.jp/research/kenkyu/chiiki_h30.html.

There is clearly still significant progress to be made in encouraging men to take a more active and direct role in family affairs but the ikumen project faces some problems. One of these is that there has been a backlash against the male-centric focus of ikumen, with some viewing it as setting female household labour up as an expected inevitability, and male labour as something to be praised for its rarity (Asahi, 2019). Rather than helping erase rigid gender norms, some have argued that it may, in fact, reinforce them (Kayama, 2017), with one PR firm claiming that terms such as ikumen are outdated language in their gender specificity (Kamitaki, 2021).

An arguably more important criticism of the concept, however, is that it is very clearly focused on the issue of division of household labour, far more than it is the question of men's emotional roles within the family structure. The former is certainly something that needs to be addressed and a gender-neutral approach to household chores is a worthy but separate concern. The government's own Ikumen page explains its purpose as being that if men embrace ikumen, 'the way of life of women as wives will change. The potential of children and the nature of the family will change dramatically. Society as a whole will also grow more prosperous'.⁸ It does not mention the emotional needs of the men themselves and the long pattern of distancing they have experienced from meaningful participation in family relationships. In a review of outstanding weaknesses in the ikumen policy, the Director of the government's Work Environment and Equality Bureau stated that 'It is very important for men to actively raise children from the perspective of enhancing the child-rearing environment and continuing employment for women'.⁹ In short, the key flaws were identified as the failure of more men to take paternity leave from work and insufficient participation in childcare. Emotional health, in terms of helping men adjust their life priorities from career goals to relationship goals, was not significantly addressed. Part of this is likely to be that for the government, at least, ikumen is more an economic policy designed to encourage more women to join, or remain in, the workforce, rather than a sincere effort to adjust men's views on the importance of family bonds.

In his own assessment of the importance of sharing household chores, Sechiyama (2014) finishes by stating 'it is a blessing to be able to spend so much time with my children...the time I picked her up from nursery and she ran to me with her hands in the air and hugged me...I believe that we live for those priceless memories'. This is the reality of what men themselves need from ikumen. It should be not only a means of supporting their family but also a means of families providing emotional support and deeper meaning for men. There has to be a change in focus regarding men's roles in relation to their families, where they are viewed as more than simply a labourer, whether this is in terms of household chores or regarding a primary career. Just as burden-sharing is an important issue in terms of supporting the advancement of women, supporting the emotional

⁸From the 'About' section of the Ikumen Project site, <https://ikumen-project.mhlw.go.jp/project/about/>.

⁹Ikumen Project activity report for 2020, <https://ikumen-project.mhlw.go.jp/project/activity/2020/>.

stability and well-being of men, is something that will provide benefit not only for those men but also for their families and society as a whole.

Conclusion

It is certainly true that the majority of men in Japan do not suffer from the issues (misogyny, lolita complexes, or rejection of relationships) that have been mentioned here. There are also a great number of Japanese men who do enjoy emotionally rewarding and meaningful familial bonds. However, it is the outlier cases and the aberrant behaviours that arise from them that highlight some deep problems within Japan's gender norms. Even men who do not exhibit extreme behaviour often suffer from emotional stress and distancing that affects how they view and interact with women. On an institutional and societal level, such attitudes can have a pervasive effect, influencing problems such as the commodification of sex and gender-based violence.

Schultz et al. (2010, p. 186) wrote that 'the liberalisation of gender beliefs will occur only insofar as the necessary social-institutional supports for the integration of women into the workforce are available and there is a demand on the part of women for a revolution in gender roles'. These changes cannot be restricted to how society views women: for deep change to occur and longstanding problems to be properly addressed, the way that men are viewed, and the way they in turn view women and families must also change.

The ikumen project was a positive move in this direction but it remains hampered by its excessive focus on men's family role being one of labour rather than one of love. There needs to be a greater focus on the importance of emotional communication, the development of more interactive and mutually respectful relationships between the genders, and frank and open discussion of sexual health. Ideally, this would occur from a young age so that both men and women in Japan can develop with a deeper and more positive understanding of, and attitude to, the opposite sex. In addressing the difficulties faced by women in society, it can be common to view men as being part of the problem. The reality is that such problems harm men as much as they do women and by addressing them, we can help society as a whole establish more equitable gender norms.

References

- Abe, S. (2020, June 4). ろくでなし子被告、3Dデータ提供で有罪維持の公算 [Megumi Igarashi is likely to remain guilty by providing 3D data]. *Asahi Shimbun*.
 AFP. (2018, January 26). 'Male fans prefer primary school girls': How Japan walks a fine line when it comes to sexualising children. Agence-France Presse.
 Alexy, A. (2010). The door my wife closed: Houses, families, and divorce in contemporary Japan. In R. Ronald & A. Alexy (Eds.), *Home and family in Japan: Continuity and transformation*. London: Routledge.
 Allison, A. (2009). *Nightwork*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
 Asahi. (2019, October 19). イクメンどう思う？ [What do you think of Ikumen?]. *Asahi Shimbun*.

- Asahi. (2020, December 7). 男らしさって？ [What is masculinity?]. *Asahi Shimbun*.
- Asahi. (2021, February 3). 「女性がたくさん入っている会議は時間かかる」森喜朗氏 [Meetings with a lot of women “take too much time” Yoshiro Mori]. *Asahi Shimbun*.
- Behrens, K., & Kondo-Ikemure, K. (2011). Japanese children’s amae and mothers’ attachment status as assessed by the adult attachment interview. *International Journal of Psychology, 46*(5), 368–376.
- Benedict, R. (1989). *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword: Patterns of Japanese culture*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin.
- Cabinet Office. (2011). 「男性にとっての男女共同参画」に関する意識調査報告書 - 第2章 調査結果の概要 [Gender equality for men: Awareness survey report – chapter 2, summary of survey results]. Japan Cabinet Office, Gender Equality Bureau.
- Cabinet Office. (2021). 「令和3年度 性別による無意識の思い込み (アンコンシャス・バイアス) に関する調査研究調査結果」 [Survey research on unconscious beliefs (unconscious bias) by gender survey results]. Japan Cabinet Office, Gender Equality Bureau.
- Cherry, K. (2016). *Womansword what Japanese words say about women*. Berkeley: Stonebridge.
- Chu, C. S. K. (2018). *Compensated dating: Buying and selling sex in cyberspace*. London: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Dentsu. (2021, February 5). ジェンダーに関する意識調査 [Gender awareness survey]. Dentsu Communication Institute Compass.
- Doi, T. (1973). *The anatomy of dependence*. Tokyo: Kodansha International.
- Galbraith, P. W. (2017). *The Moe Manifesto: An insider’s look at the worlds of manga, anime, and gaming*. Clarendon, VT: Tuttle Publishing.
- Hashimoto, N., Ushitora, K., Morioka, M., Terunori, M., Tanaka, K., Tashiro, M., ... Sawamura, F. (2017). School education and development of gender perspectives and sexuality in Japan. *Sex Education, 17*(4), 386–398.
- Iwao, S. (1993). *The Japanese woman: Traditional image and changing reality*. New York, NY: Free Press.
- Johnston, E. (2020, March 6). Women in Japanese politics: Why so few after so very long? *Japan Times*.
- Jolivet, M. (1997). *Japan: The childless society? The crisis of motherhood*. London: Routledge.
- Joyce, L., Paulson, J., & Powers, E. (1976). *Women in changing Japan*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Kadokura, T. (2007). Total value of boryukudan activities and the enjo-kosai market. *Japanese Economy, 34*, 62–87.
- Kamitaki, K. (2021, March 25). PRに求められるジェンダーのアップデート、イクメンは誉め言葉でなく死語 [Gender update required for PR, Ikumen is a dead language, not a compliment]. Kyodo PR.
- Kayama, R. (2017, August 7). クメンという言葉こそジェンダーギャップの象徴？ [Is the word Ikumen a symbol of the gender gap?]. *FQ Magazine*.
- Kinouchi, T. (2021, March 6). Japan adds female executives but they take only 8% of board seats. *Nikkei Asia*.
- Kitamura, K. (2011). セックス嫌いな若者たち [Young people who do not like to have sex]. Tokyo: Media Factory.

- Kitayama, S., Mesquito, B., & Karasawa, M. (2006). Cultural affordances and emotional experience: Socially engaging and disengaging emotions in Japan and the United States. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 91, 890–903.
- Komatsu, K. (2011). *Attachment and amae: A comparative study of mother-child close relationships in Japan and Britain*. Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh.
- Koyama, S. (2013). *The educational ideal of 'good wife, wise mother' in modern Japan*. Leiden: Brill.
- Kuwahara, R. (2019, October 31). Children deprived of the right to learn about sex. Retrieved from [Nippon.com](http://nippon.com).
- Lee, T. Y. (2016). A longitudinal study of compensated dating and juvenile prostitution behaviors among adolescents in Hong Kong. *Journal of Pediatric and Adolescent Gynecology*, 29(1), S31–S37.
- Mainichi. (2019, February 5). Politicians show ignorance in attacks on women for not having children. *Mainichi Japan*.
- Manne, K. (2019). *Down girl: The logic of misogyny*. Youngstown, OH: Penguin.
- Maruta, K. (2001). 誰が誰に何を売るのが?—援助交際に見る性・愛・コミュニケーション [Who sells what to whom?—Sex, love, and communication seen in Enkou Dating]. Nishinomiya: Kwansei Gakuin University Press.
- Miyamoto, M. (1994). *Straight jacket society: An insider's irreverent view of Bureaucratic Japan*. Tokyo: Kodansha.
- Nicolae, R. (2014). Sōshoku(kei) danshi: The (un)gendered questions on contemporary Japan. *Romanian Economic and Business Review*, 9(3), 66.
- Nikkei. (2020, February 23). Number of births in Japan falls to record low in 2020. *Nikkei Asia*.
- NSK. (2019). 第8回「若者の性」白書 [8th white paper on youth sexuality]. Shougakukan: Nihon Seikyōuiku Kyōkai.
- Ochiai, E. (1997). The Japanese family system in transition: A sociological analysis of family change in postwar Japan. LCTB International Library Association.
- Otake, T. (2017, May 5). Professor examines Lolita complex by first looking at his own experience. *Japan Times*.
- Rengo. (2019, October 8). 男性の家事・育児参加に関する実態調査 [Survey on men's participation in housework and childcare]. Japan Trade Union Confederation Rengo.
- Salamon, S. (1974). Male chauvinism as an expression of love in Japanese marriages. In T. S. Lebra (Ed.), *Japanese culture and behaviour selected readings* (pp. 130–141). Honolulu, HI: University of Honolulu Press.
- Saeki, E., Watanabe, Y., & Kido, M. (2015). Developmental and gender trends in emotional and interpersonal competence among Japanese children. *The International Journal of Emotional Education*, 7(2), 15–35.
- Saito, K. (2013). Magic, Shojo, and Metamorphosis: Magical girl anime and the challenges of changing gender identities in Japanese society. *Journal of Asian Studies*, 73(1), 143–164.
- Sankei, S. (2015, July 30). 草食どころか絶食に?! 恋愛しない若者が急増中 [Fasting instead of herbivorous? Young people who are not in love increasing rapidly]. *Sankei Shinbun*.
- Sato, K. (2009). From Hello Kitty to Cod Roe Kewpie: A postwar cultural history of cuteness in Japan. *Education About Asia*, 14(2), 38–42.
- SBJ. (2020). *Statistical handbook of Japan 2020*. Tokyo: Statistics Bureau of Japan.

- Schultz, L. K., Tufis, P., & Alwin, D. (2010). Separate spheres or increasing equality? Changing gender beliefs in Postwar Japan. *Journal of Family and Marriage*, 72(1), 184–201.
- Sechiyama, K. (2014, March 14). 東大ジェンダー学者の戦略的イクメン化計画: 育児で男にできないことなんて、何ひとつない [The University of Tokyo Gender Scholar's Strategic Ikumenization Plan: There is nothing a man can't do when raising a child]. Tokyo Keizai.
- Silva-Grodin, M. (2010). Women in ancient Japan: From matriarchal antiquity to acquiescent confinement. *Inquiries Journal*, 2(9).
- St Michel, P. (2013, February 8). A pop star shouldn't shave her head in shame for having a boyfriend. *The Atlantic*.
- Takahashi, G., & Tsunku. (2003). てっぺん (Top). Bijenesu-sha.
- Tanaka, C. (2019, January 11). Outrage erupts online in Japan after assaulted NGT48 pop idol apologises for 'causing trouble'. *Japan Times*.
- Teo, A. R., & Gaw, A. C. (2010). Hikikomori, a Japanese culture-bound syndrome of social withdrawal? *The Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease*, 198(6), 444–449.
- Tocco, M. C. (2003). Norms and texts for women's education in Tokugawa Japan. In D. Ko, J. K. Haboush, & J. R. Piggott (Eds.), *Women and confucian cultures in Premodern China, Korea, and Japan* (pp. 193–218). Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Ueno, C. (2019). ミソジニーとは何か? 上野 [What is misogyny?]. 立教大学ジェンダーフォーラム年報 [Rikkyo University gender forum annual report], 21, 1–20.
- Uno, K. (1993). The death of "good wife, wise mother". In A. Gordon (Ed.), *Postwar Japan as history*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Varley, C. (2017, March 7). Is Japan turning a blind eye to paedophilia? BBC.
- Wakabayashi, T. (2003). Enjokosai in Japan: Rethinking the dual image of prostitutes in Japanese and American law. *UCLA Women's Journal*, 13, 143–184.
- Yano, C. (2009). Wink on pink: Interpreting Japanese cute as it grabs the global headlines. *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 68(3), 681–688.
- Yoshiko, M. (1997). Excerpts from 'sexuality'. In S. Buckley (Ed.), *Broken silence: Voices of Japanese feminism* (pp. 170–183). Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.